

# PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal

---

Volume 1  
Issue 1 *Transformative Possibilities:  
Transcending Interlocking Boundaries*

---

Article 2

2004

## Another Visit to Red and Blue States

Jason Gary Damron  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/mcnair>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

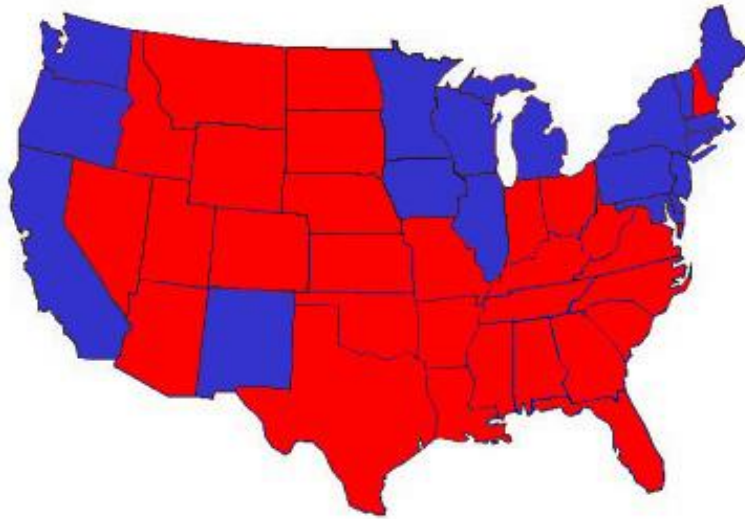
Damron, Jason Gary (2004) "Another Visit to Red and Blue States," *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*.  
Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2.  
<https://doi.org/10.15760/mcnair.2005.74>

This open access Article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). All documents in PDXScholar should meet [accessibility standards](#). If we can make this document more accessible to you, [contact our team](#).

## Another Visit to Red and Blue States

Jason G. Damron

Faculty Mentors: Marcia Klotz & Cherry Muhanji



-2000 USA Presidential Results

---

*Interpreting the intersection of Queer, Marxist, and other political economic theory may provide a more textured understanding of contemporaneous political, academic, and media assessments of social thinking and its supposed patterns. Another understanding of the popular, diagrammatic prescription of “Red and Blue” state America reveals this rhetoric as a disguise for political economic ends. Interrogating the politics of moral panics and “culture wars” emphasizes that central to this supposed schism is the anxiety of “other” sexualities and moralities and their implications on the capitalistic family. Querying this red/blueprint is significant for its illumination of moral panics, the familialist rhetoric of bourgeois economic interests, and leftist discourses of identity politics and pseudo-political queer strategies. I argue that a political economic critique of both right and left political discursive traditions exposes the red and the blue state rhetoric as a diversionary political tactic that evacuates a meaningful critique of capitalism.*

---

*The term 'blue states' describes those U.S. states that vote for the Democratic Party in presidential elections, the only national elections held in the United States. The origin of the term is from television newscasts that reveal on presidential election night which candidate has carried which states in the U.S. Electoral College usually through a map of the country with the states predicted to go to one candidate or another lit up in one primary color or another. Traditionally the color used for the Republican Party is red and the Democratic Party blue, and thus the states the Democrats usually win are referred to as blue states. Blue states have several demographic differences from red states, thus the term now has cultural implications as well, implying a liberal region or a more liberal type of American.<sup>1</sup>*

*How about a truce? The intolerant religious fanatics in the red states will continue not complaining about high taxes, secular education and gay-rights parades in the blue states, and the proponents of tolerance in the blue states will stop bothering everyone in the red states.<sup>2</sup>*

As I was passing through farm country somewhere in Illinois I saw a neatly manicured lawn, abutting a brightly greened field of corn. In the yard was a cacophony of yard signs that urged citizens to support certain candidates in the upcoming election. Dotted throughout this yard, striped by the careful clipping of a lawn mower, were signs that declared BUSH-CHENEY as an appropriate choice for the President and Vice-President of the United States in 2004. The sheer number of these signs left no doubt as to the occupants' political affiliation.<sup>3</sup> A community a few miles away held opposite political sentiment; each yard along a tree-lined street declared allegiance to JOHN KERRY, and a stronger America. Considering that Illinois was penned as a "strong blue state," according to a recent website dedicated to predicting electoral votes, I wondered if the BUSH-CHENEY supporters, just miles away, were hoping that their numerous political placards could assuage the reality that Illinois would "go blue", analogous to screaming loudest in a debate to ensure winning.<sup>4</sup> Yet, to me, the similarity of the yards and houses and communities made either indistinguishable without the signs. Are there real differences between the two? What are the fears and anxieties that fuel such political allegiances?

\*\*\*\*\*

As I began to look at the red-blue divide in more depth, it became clear that a rhetoric of “family” was crucial to those on both sides (though they meant very different things with the word). I also noticed that real, existing families in the United States have material concerns that are not being addressed by either political camp. In this paper, I will be examining how the political right in the United States—those in the “red states”—have redefined political discourse to shift focus away from material concerns and onto issues of the “family”—actually a code name for arousing fears around topics of sexuality. Unfortunately, the left—those in the “blue states”—have been surprisingly complicit in this shift in focus, allowing so-called cultural (and especially sexual) issues to eclipse real, material concerns facing most U.S. citizenry.

In this paper I will question what material, economic concerns are disguised in the political idiom of red and blue states in order to explore the political contentions between the right and the left in American political discourse. I will first examine the rhetoric of the red and blue state electoral map. Then I will assess of the discursive tradition of ‘familialism’ to show that foundational to right and left political rhetoric is a contested definition of the family. Next, right-wing politics of moral panics and familialist rhetoric of ‘traditional’ morality will be examined; this will be complicated by an employment of post-structuralist and historical constructionist interpretations of the same. Following, I will interrogate leftist (especially queer theory) discourses of affectional families, identity politics and political performance strategies (especially those that attempt to disrupt the right’s assertion of ‘tradition’ and ‘family’ using post-structuralist and historical constructionist elucidation). I will fault these for their own peculiar construction (ironically) of the family, thus highlighting the particular resonance that familialist rhetoric enjoys in both political ideologies.

I attempt to illuminate the problems and inconsistencies within both right and left political, capitalistic projects (and conceptualized in the red and blue state electoral maps) as disguises of real, widespread material and economic worries. The materialist concerns of the so-called American middle class will be retrieved from underneath this deceitful moral debate of the red and the blue, sustained by both right-wing moral crusades *and* within sexuality and queer studies that simultaneously rely on and disregard historical capitalism in their psychoanalytically personalized treatments of identity, morality, the family, and the self. Material, economic anxieties are best understood, then, by employing the critical tradition of Marxism and rejecting more flexible neo-Marxist theories that recognize politics of identity without critical attention to their construction. I will be mindful of how social construction and post-structuralist thought claim to be concerned with the ‘instances of discursive production...of the production of power and of the propagation of

knowledge which makes possible a history of the present' (Foucault 1977). This paper's history of the present, then, presents "the red and the blue" as a reductionist overlay designed to invoke moral difference as an illustrative diversion from structural and economic deficiencies.

### **Red State-Blue State**

Are you in a red state, or a blue state? Are you in a red county, or a blue city? Do you feel alienated in your colored zone? What political color do you morally believe in? Do you fear the other? Do you claim your post-election allegiance with a neat, plastic identification bracelet? The commonality of this rhetorical course employed by government, academia, and media—intent on dividing American voters into manageable, understandable, statistical parts—is as frequent as the elections that presage them. Since the contested 2000 Presidential election results between Al Gore and George W. Bush, the parlance "red and blue states" has been *the* provocative neologistic tool for dividing the interests, moralities, and anxieties of American people.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, media, academics, and government officials react and fret that America has become hopelessly divided.

Regardless of any demographic political value of this supposed schism, the red and the blue offers a background to an examination of how American citizens are taught to regard their system of government and their place in the political landscape supposedly reflecting their hopes, resentments, anxieties and respective familial fears. The red-and-blue map is a schema that immobilizes the axes of political discourse that intersect all forums of American society: religion, media, government, and entertainment. It maps hypothesized dissimilar moralities, literally and figuratively, within the borders and boundaries of an atlas of 'values'.

Respected, widely circulated newsmagazines have promulgated this 'red and blue' concern-cum-delight into front-page warnings (the *New Yorker* magazine memorably splashed two angry, red and blue colored faces staring endlessly into each other's eyes, mouths twisted and agape, fireworks exploding in the background). Popular, political culture has been flooded with the paroxysms of pundits, personalities, writers, and certain scholars who proclaim America as hopelessly, endlessly divided by a loathing between the red and the blue caused by a deeply dissimilar relationship to morality, religion, values, family, sex, justice, pragmatism, and even the products selected to be eaten, drank, and enjoyed.

There is no need to continue to debate the red and the blue using the terms and methods that have created such a schematic. A minority of scholars and journalists are already querying the red and the blue (after four years of constructing the debatable morality map) as election hysteria

that never quite ebbed in the wake of the contested 2000 election. Hamilton College's James S. Sherman Associate Professor of Government Philip Klinkner contends that many journalists and political pundits have needlessly hyped the idea that Americans are isolated *and* isolating themselves along political, territorial lines. According to Klinkner's study, "The red and blue maps give you the mistaken impression of geographic schism in American politics—that all Democrats live in one area and all Republicans live in another. In fact, there is quite a lot of mixing of Democrats and Republicans over the electoral landscape." Klinkner theorizes that most Americans live in "purple" areas. "The great majority of Americans live in a county where neither party wins in a landslide and where both parties have managed to win at least one presidential election in the last 16 years."<sup>6</sup>

Yet, regarding the red and the blue as *only* the results of a hyped schism ignores the way that the red and blue diagrammatic symbolically works for a specific understanding of social thinking and political discourse. This, though, should not be misunderstood as a justification for this type of tool. Debating the red and the blue with another palette of political understanding (with purple, or yellow, or other colors as some statisticians, journalists, and political scientists have done) only re-engineers the disguise, blunting other analyses, and bringing to the fore an indispensable reminder from Karl Marx's—avoid the temptation to engage in the exercise of “phrases fighting phrases” with no practical, material end.

It has been argued that political discourse in America has been coarsened by the focus on the ultimately ethereal conceptions of morality and values, which fuels rhetorical attacks on the ‘character’ of politicians and their political parties. Any number of recently published political treatises provide a glimpse, and a large measure of validation, to this claim.<sup>7</sup> The majority of these polemics, though, do nothing to demystify the red and the blue, but rely instead on its supposed truths, thus, making their own arguments of intractable moral divisions ever more salient. In contrast, I would like to strip the red and the blue of their rhetorical mapping power and interrogate them for the discursive sets of family, morality, and politics that both red and blue represent.

### **Familial Colors of Morality**

In the scholarly work *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution*, Gertrude Himmelfarb, historian of the Victorian-era, converts perceived moral anxieties into distinct “cultural” differences that predisposed, if not prejudiced, much of the rhetorical debate that followed the 2000 Presidential election (1999). Her book opens with a quote by Adam Smith from *The Wealth of Nations*:

In every civilized society, in every society where the distinction of ranks has once been completely established, there have been always two different schemes or systems of morality current at the same time; of which one may be called the strict or austere; the other the liberal, or, if you will, the loose system. The former is generally admired and revered by the common people: the latter is commonly more esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion (3).

Despite Himmelfarb's assurance that Smith was not attempting to indicate that all people subscribed to the two systems of morality, nor shared their cultural conventions with the appropriately strict or loose prescriptions, she does grant his two-system model central, touchstone status in her exposition of the thus-theorized two moral cultures of America.

Adam Smith, in *Wealth of Nations*, ranked America as a noteworthy exception to the two-system model because of what he found to be a virtuous, Puritan impulse sustained in all the American people and in their representative government. Himmelfarb uses this position to laud America for its Puritan ethos, and in the process views the cultural upheavals of the 1920's as nothing more than 'petting in automobiles', but the 1960's 'counter-culture' (and its 'hedonisms') as a dangerously ironic and supremely damaging product of the spoiled youth of capitalistic society. She posits that those who joined the counterculture from the underclass, without the cushion of privilege to escape if its liberatory promises failed, were introduced into a culture of lasting ethical, moral, and economic poverty (Himmelfarb 25-26). She is typical of right-wing theorists in positing that the *economic* poverty facing many Americans results from a *culture* of poverty, assuming that if you can change the cultural conditions—code for sexual ethics—it would magically lift these people out of poverty. Similarly, many right-wing scholars and historians attempt to insulate their arguments from Marxist and leftist criticism by recognizing the contradictory conditions that capitalism allows for, but never calling for a reformation of capitalism (or any part thereof); instead aiming for a restoration of civil society as the seedbed of virtues lost in the cultivation of America's morally relativist culture. "It is the process of reformation and remoralization that now engages the hard advocates of civil society as they confront the hard problems of democratic society—education, welfare, crime, popular culture, and above all, the family" (Himmelfarb 44).

While many leftists have dismissed such arguments as patently ridiculous, they have been repeated often enough that they come to resonate with a large portion of the public. Jeffrey Weeks, Judith Stacey and other feminist and queer scholars are reacting to a similar recognition that



sexuality and family are the touchstone for the contemporary anguish about values. “The Left has for too long assumed that the value-laden discourse of the morally conservative did not deserve a considered response from liberals and radicals because such ideas were self-evidently ill-intentioned” and this left a theoretical vacuum that new-leftists now seek to fill without “the prerogative of any type of relationship, least of all a mythical and heavily mythologized traditional family” (Weeks 53). So, even despite Weeks’, and others, hesitancy to reference a concretized cultural “family”, he must, and does, conjure a model of a family of “affectional choice” (53). Chafing at the right’s version of a totalizing nuclear family, Weeks, Judith Stacey, and other “radicals” must counter with a familialist theory of their own, so as to enjoin the debate about the production and reproduction of certain values that they hope are more fully developed, what Weeks calls a “love ethic” (54). On the rhetorical boundaries of the red and the blue states lives this contested American family. For the right, it is a family of tradition and obligation. For the left, it is a family of affection and choice. The family’s esteemed past, present make-up, and future purpose are the elements debated in this contested message embedded in the dichromatic political warnings of red and blue.

Both the right and the left, however, ignore or reduce the capitalistic system that engineers the family, in the first place, in various permutations. As much as scholars, politicians, and media pundits of the right imagine the less-than-hospitable effects of capitalism on the family, they are loathe to trace an arc of the “family” to its inception in the same utopias that capitalism continually promises. As Himmelfarb writes, “The family now seems to be in a more perilous state than capitalism,” but with her imaginary differentiation intact (47). Thus, rightist scholars and politicians identify capitalism and its “impact” on the family as a tangential dialectic that should only be of concern when lamenting, say, the rise of the entertainment industry or other deleterious social institutions.

For the right, the family is now breaking down, under constant assault by non-patriarchal, co-habitational, single-parent, and other “non-traditional” families. These dangers are located beyond the reaches of capitalism. The left responds by arguing for choice, autonomy, and representation, unwittingly reproducing this familialist rhetoric. Scholars who remind that the history of capitalism is not separate from the historical construction of the family are only employed by leftists to affront the right with ripostes that narrate the variation in the “nature” of the family, but these histories are abandoned when it complicates the emancipatory aims of politics.

The red states see the family as rooted in a hallowed tradition, vulnerable to toxic individual choices that are excused (or even assisted) by a liberal welfare state. The blue states see the family as



longing for individualized recognition and choice from an even-handed non-moralistic liberal state, but consistently disrupted by an adoption of its own omniscient rhetoric of identity by political antagonists. The political dilemmas about “what to do” with these contrasting concerns stimulate the right-inspired moral panics, which seek to dramatically bring into sharp relief the topography of the existing moral erosion.

### **The Red State**

For Karl Marx, “culture really has only one parent, and that is labour—which for him is equivalent to saying, exploitation. The culture of class society tends to repress this unwelcome truth; it prefers to dream up for itself a nobler progenitor, denying its lowly parenthood and imagining that it sprang simply from previous culture, or from unfettered individual imagination” (Eagleton 8). The right-wing family tradition is unmistakably the noble progenitor and, simply, it is conceived as vulnerable to attack.

The breakdown of the American family for much of the right has taken on a mystical, pathological quality. This discourse imagines family life theoretically rooted in a wholesome, patriarchal, nuclear culture. “Pathologies” prey upon and breed within lives that defy customary these familial obligations and expectations. Alternative family proponents are assailed for turning a blind eye to the various and variable self-evident statistics of familial breakdown (everything from poverty, to crime, to homosexuality, to abortion). The pathologies that continue to breakdown the already eroded contemporary family culture and “culture”, in some general form, are thus medicalized as pathological social problems. This rightist lexicon distances structural social problems from the real, material capitalistic matrix, from which they emerge. Social problems and anxieties are, therefore, located in some free-floating, treacherous moral climate where improper choices are made and related diseases result. I am not arguing that moral conditioning is unnecessary for society to function, I am simply noting that right reduces all social programs to moral pathologies. The more spectacular the ensuing moral panic, the better.

Moral panics are political struggles that have been condensed to control the means of cultural reproduction. Moral panics manipulate social actors into interpreting some things as profoundly serious and other things as not worthy of sustained attention (Cohen 2003). This is reminiscent of Anthropologist Gayle Rubin’s discussion of sex and sexuality as occupying an exceptional place in political discourse—one that relies on the “fallacy of misplaced scale” where sex and sexuality are inherently sinful, dangerous, destructive, and a “corollary of sex negativity” (11). As

such, aspects of sex and sexuality (e.g., gay marriage, abortion, pedophilia, teen pregnancy) continue to be a most compelling theme for these moral panics.

The right uses moral panics to harness *other* social anxieties (especially economic ones) and diffuse them into warnings of sexual damnation, which are then coupled with the ongoing concern for the vulnerable family. Cauthen and Jaspers, in their review of Philip Jenkins *Intimate Enemies*, noted that moral panics tend to follow a similar sequence: a problem is identified as extremely common, rapidly growing, and largely unrecognized; innocent victims are identified (here, the family); and remedial policies are suggested. “Each panic elaborates and extends symbols from past panics; this gradual layering increases the plausibility and threatening nature of each panic, no matter how little hard evidence there may be for it” (Cauthen & Jasper 497). Rubin also notes the layering of the panic using past and present political worries: “right-wing ideology linking non-familial sex with communism and political weakness is nothing new.” Neither is linking sexual immorality and national weakness to “sex education, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, and pre-marital sex” (Rubin 8).

Sexual moral panics rely on the construction of class of innocent victims (Patton 1993). The family as the innocent victim, though, is paradoxical as it is also the social site where personal, moral failures supposedly take shape. The innocent family (naturally functional if certain moralities are in place) relies on “fictionalized ideals and composites [that] have become more real than reality itself, exacerbating the sense of dysfunction” which serves as continuing, circular justification for frequent right-wing moral crusades (Creed 2000). The ‘moral crusaders’ who drive the moral panic want to help those beneath them to achieve a better moral status and to erase the dangers that lurk in specific moralized class conditions that threaten the family (Becker 140). The more they succeed, the more they derive power from their superior, moral position, and the more they lay claim to nationalistic ideals. Within the halls of congressional and executive power these moral, nationalistic crusaders have found sympathetic ears.<sup>8</sup>

The red-state, blue-state atlas is partly constructed as, and interpreted by, the right as a series of moral panics. Gay marriage, abortion, single-parent families, drug use, Internet predation, all of which are condensed into one binarism: *We* care about protecting the morality and the family; *They* don’t. These moral panics are now territorialized— anxieties mapped by cartographers’ borderlines. This map is designed to excite and aggravate the citizenry with appeals to the seeming dysfunction of the American family, as neatly represented in the dysfunction of the national union.

## The Blue State

The left, especially within academia, repeatedly reminds us that the regulation of sex is a common feature of human society, whether in the form of kinship systems, the economies that traffic in women, or sexual taboos regarding same-sex partners. Foucault calls these regulatory cultural regimes “deployments of alliance”; “sexuality” is one of the social regulatory methods of sex acts, thus, sexuality is the “name that can be given to a historical construct... a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (Foucault 105-106). Human actions have and continue to be subject to these historical, discursive forces and, thus, to change. Therefore, sexuality-based classificatory schemes are equally embedded in time and place.

Theories that stress the social constructedness of sexuality violate common-sensical assumptions that sexuality is natural and essential. “For all of us, essentialism was our first way of thinking about sexuality and still remains the hegemonic one in the culture” (Vance 160-161). The constructionist framework challenges the natural status of many domains, and especially an understanding of the family that relies on the naturalness of gender and (hetero) sexuality; the family as a biologized, natural state is called into question, as is its relationship to and within capitalistic development.

Before the industrial capitalistic transformation, the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘family’ was generally composed as a self-sufficient unit: independent and patriarchal. The family and its immediate members ran household economies. For all intent and purpose of the law, family members were owned by the father (or other male head of household). This patriarchal household economy experienced a major disruption as wage labor, at the behest of an emerging merchant class in urban centers in the northeast of America, fashioned family members into wage earners. This quickly became a “permanent condition” for the majority of men, though it was necessarily uncommon for women (D’Emilio 170-172). This massive process of proletarianization and urbanization broke down both productive and reproductive patterns. Working class wage-earning youth, by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, were more economically and sexually autonomous than in any other historical time frame. It was here, in the wage laboring lives of urban and commercially dependent residents, where the conditions for “private”, emotional, erotic lives developed. The social space that produced the private, erotic self was carved from the social order that depended on the collapse of the self-sufficient family and the investment in the ideological ideal of free-labor. The meaning of

heterosexual relations changed as the imperative to procreate became disengaged from the bond of marriage. “Heterosexual expression came to be a means of establishing intimacy, promoting happiness, and experiencing pleasure” (D’Emilio 171). At this time, the emerging discourse of sexology began to suggest a kind of erotic speciation. This speciation, as Michel Foucault expansively hypothesized in *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, resulted in the invention of the “homosexual”, as well as other categories of “perversion”. The middle-to late-19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a solidifying of the legal definitions of sexual outcasts as sexual behavior became enmeshed in state and cultural surveillance. The social mechanisms of medicine, psychology and law aided in their own professional legitimacy by their ability to name, define, and divide the social body by its supposedly deviant and threatening members (Greenberg; Terry; Gagnon & Parker). Therefore, as the new modes of production assisted in the production of new conceptions of “self” and a new construction of the “family”, it also produced a professional class concerned with and intent on discovering and defining the same.

This historical reading has major implications for understanding the modern political deployment of morality and, thus, the moral panics that ensue in defense of the natural family. Categories of perversion, as invented moralities within capitalistic expansion, are targeted as dangerous to the bourgeois family. Paradoxically, anxiety about a threatened, dysfunctional family was (is) produced by the same capitalistic conditions that developed the social space for new conceptions of the private, sexual selves that supposedly threaten it. If our contemporary understanding of sexual morality is actually a product of this development within capitalism, where does that leave us? Some sex radicals would argue for a rejection of the trappings of nuclear family and desire to celebrate sexuality for its own sake, while others use this historical argument to reveal the family as an inherently flexible social structure allowing for assimilation into an ever-expanding social norm.

The debate, whether to radically reject the traditional ‘family’ model as a liberatory practice or assimilate within the model of nuclear familial tradition, is complicated by the fact that these historical constructionist theories expose the capitalistic, historical inventions of not only the family, but “gay and lesbian” and “alternative sexualities.” The development of capitalism thus engineers both the capitalistic fantasy of family and the very categories that “deviant” sexualities now inhabit and identify with. In essence, the left has propagated social deconstructionist as part of an emancipatory political strategy, while attempting to assimilate within the very models that are supposedly so oppressive.<sup>9</sup> In other words, what has the potential to elucidate the intertwining

discursive understanding of capitalism, morality, and the family has been employed for specific type of political lamentation, and an evacuation of a collective political response. The left has become entrenched in the political stratagem of offering personal tales of oppressive experience in an effort to counter the right's crown of capitalist morality, while aiming for the same. This personal identity politics is constructed as political liberation, as much as the blue states are hypothesized as tolerant and liberal toward diversity for a greater good. This model has found its greatest traction under the mantle of queer theory.

Queer theory has an aim to queer—to alter, to contrast, and delegitimize—heteronormative knowledges and the subjectivities and social institutions that it engenders. Ironically, queer theory is formed in reaction to the restrictive embrace by the left of sexual and gender difference. Queer theory wants more—it wants to push the boundaries of assimilationist tendencies that this embrace has on a “radical politics” (Sullivan 2003). What queer theorists may have dramatically failed at, though, is just that: politics of any kind, especially a “radical” one.

Queer theory relies on a narrative which “resistance and agency are presented as driven by uncontainable desire; emancipation is a teleological story in which desire ultimately overcomes social control and becomes visible” (Scott 400). Wendy Brown argues that this binds gays, lesbians, and queers with narrative attachment to wounds of a repressed liberation; a liberation restricted in the shadow of normalizing capitalistic narratives of gender, sexuality, and family. Seeking emancipation from these norms by questioning their construction ignores the similar capitalistic invention of the liberated identities “queers” seek to claim (Brown 1995). Liberal political strategies thus place their narrative of individuated (often “autonomous”) experience as the central feature of address and of celebration, while ignoring its own embeddedness within capitalism.

Even though queer theory professes, in various “licensed, limited, safety-valve carnivalesque transgression...as postmodern poetics” to destabilize political oppression with an ever renewed identity politics—it is only a beginning to recognize individual sexual experience (Kiley 1998). The agenda of identity politics, emblematic of the left for over three decades, “sets out to legitimize oppressed social groups while leaving the organization of social life in fundamental ways unquestioned”, nowhere is the more the case than in its anemic, if not wholly absent, critique of late-industrial capitalism (Hennessy 215).

For much of queer theory, there is a real ambivalence about structuralist, capitalist interpretation of sexual subjectivity in all its dimensions, instead preferring to cling to ahistorical evidence of personal exploitation.<sup>10</sup> Sexual identity politics has failed to create “real” solidarity across

class lines, while preaching legitimization, inclusion, and liberation vis-à-vis intimate and affectional encounters. This failure supports the ultimately hollow “truth” of red and blue state citizens being totally alienated from each other. Queer studies enables an illusion of critique in “porous, gender-flexible and playful subjects, subjects more adequate to the multinational commodity exchange where the expressive self and transcendent morality of liberal humanism have become embarrassingly inadequate” (Hennessy 232). The ‘playful’ milieu of identity performance marks a vivid discursive space where there is an intense attraction for the identity politics. It is precisely these kinds of politics that allow the emblematic partitioning of America in maps of red and blue.<sup>11</sup>

### **Another Visit to Red and Blue States**

“To paraphrase Karl Marx, women and men make their own sexual and affectional history. But they do not make this history just as they please. They make it under circumstances given by the past and altered by their political activity and organization” (Katz 179). Marxist theory insists that the circumstances of the past and the political activity of the present are determined by the economic production and reproduction of a society. The real conditions of material existence are the foundation of the “ideas...conceptions...consciousness...directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.” Thus human “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Marx & Engels 154, 155). Speculation about human nature, if divorced from political economic consideration, is a fallacious version of human interactions within a society. The same can be said for the “sex” of a people—it is equally fragmented and reflected by the real material conditions of the society in which its specific interpretation is negotiated. The radical shift of income and assets to smaller percentages of people, questionable allocations of public funds to certain sectors of the U.S. economy, a lack of public funding for education, health care, and other social needs, and an erosion of civil rights, are all critical material concerns that must be interpreted and addressed in any society. To do this historical political economy can neither be abridged, nor ignored. The red and blue states, constructed by both right and left political rhetoric, are guilty of both.

For the red states “family values” is a utopia both being sought, and that which must be maintained.<sup>12</sup> Both 1988 and 1998 General Social Surveys indicate that evangelicals are still largely socio-economically disadvantaged; American evangelicals have been the most active proponents of the right’s discourse of family values. In other words, those who hail “family values” willingly mediate between disadvantageous economic conditions in the name of morality and the nation—a

perverse rationalization of the economic conditions that are the material roots of the social anxieties. Their unique importance, as the most loyal constituency of the Republican Party, is obvious when considering the Republican Party is ideologically unable to locate capitalism within any social problem. The family, then, “thus ‘solves’ the actual economic contradictions of capitalism for the capitalist, as familialism can explain and justify exploitation, crisis, and suffering in private terms that absolve the industrial capitalism of blame” (Cloud 77). In other words, the “family” is imagined as both the original location of social ills, and the site of administering cures for capitalistic social problems. The real materiality of the low-income, Republican family is exposed as “long hours, low wages, and inadequate housing have meant that workers have rarely identified with the bourgeois family ideal” even as much as they have attempted to save it (Cloud 76).

After the hypothesized “failure of Marxism” the ensuing leftist discourse attempted to engage in “radical” disciplines and identity politics with the intention of disrupting the deeper logic of familialism, but only further dislocated political attention onto the intimate sphere. In doing so Dana Cloud argues that “radical” leftist thought, like queer theory:

...in spite of its manifest opposition to normalizing familial discourses, replicates this logic. What queer theory, as a variant of post-al retreat from class politics, shares in common with mainstream discourses on ‘family values’ is an explicit effort to atomize and privatize the experience of social, economic, and political phenomena—i.e., oppression of gay and lesbians and exploitation of labor in a system that depends on the ideal—as much as the reality—of the nuclear family. Further, queer theory, like family values rhetoric, discredits collective political responses to social problem in favor of ludic textualist strategies. It poses utopian experiments in intimate fulfillment—akin to the 1950s suburban family ideal—in lieu of a collective, political struggle (Cloud 72).

Imagined intimate, private spheres are thus imagined to be effective sites of resistance and emancipation for both the right and the left. In this way capitalism’s structure is left unquestioned, while projecting structural, economic problems onto the ‘personal lives’ of its subjects.<sup>13</sup> Socialized political attention is thus continually deflected into pseudo-political strategies of “self-scrutiny, self-development, and self-blame” concerned with the invented arena of private life. Of course, ‘private’ life is political in capitalist society, since under capitalism, ‘privacy’ names those realms that that are



obscured from political view and absolved of collective responsibility and public control” (72-73; 74).

Despite this constant deflection, moments of socialized protest do erupt—momentarily tearing back the curtains on the careful stagecraft of capitalism. In 1999, protests attempted to disrupt the World Trade Organization “private” meetings in Seattle, Washington. Since then, many scholars and political commentators have noted the unique combination of political committees that had assembled, bringing together a number of political objectives in solidarity to protest these undemocratic meetings (Medovoi 2001). Remembering that in Marxist thought, political resistance is not rooted in the protection of “private” families, “intimate” spheres, or the invention of ever-more alternative subjectivities, but that “the common ground for political action comes from solidarity—across race, gender, sexuality—of the working class”, reminds one that the protests in Seattle were temporally unique and uniquely dangerous to capitalism (Cloud 89). They also speak to the way the moral panics melt away if political economic concerns are adequately articulated and circulated. Unfortunately, the message of solidarity that was spoken in 1999 has since been shouted down by red and blue schemas, which replace the Seattle critique of corporate capitalism with the discordant concerns, and conflicted “personal” lives, of those who reside in the red and blue states.

Morris Fiorina, a Stanford political scientist, argues in *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* that hypothetical “cultural” divisions in the American populace are not as pronounced as some have suggested (2004). Significantly, his research polling prior to 2000 reveals that there existed widespread concerns (even fear) about corporate “power”. After the Presidential Election of 2000, contested descriptions of the American social climate, like Himmelfarb’s *One Nation, Two Cultures* and Hunter’s *Culture Wars* became newly influential. So, deep, and potentially destabilizing critiques of corporate power, capitalistic malfeasance, and oligarchical influence were overwhelmed by a contested election, a moralization of electoral patterns, and later a “war on terror”. It is of no surprise that corporately endowed Presidents, like George W. Bush, make no attempt to stem corporate corruption, and resist all significant efforts at corporate reform while waging wars in the name of “free markets”.

\*\*\*\*\*

After the contested election of 2000, the red and blue states represented the Presidential electoral voting pattern. They were then neatly mapped onto dichromatic terrain—defining the

borders of those things called moral values. A critique of both right and left political projects, which ideologically and rhetorically construct such a map, are justly illuminated as familializing *and* personalizing capitalistic strategy that diverts attention from the inequitable structures of economic life. The material harms and anxieties of this economic life are transformed into a reflection on essentialized moral differences, which now have become so pronounced as to be naturalized into *territories of moral difference*. Interrogating this has revealed that the red and blue state rhetoric makes use of a number of moral panics, deflecting collective action (from both the right and left) into a supposition of moral dissimilarity. This illusion of moral dissimilarity is achieved in academic, media, and political prescriptions by means of a less-than “playful” civil war stylization of mapped conflict. The red and the blue are colorful overlays for the machination of America’s capitalistic engine. The red and the blue are a political trope that promises a significant interpretive lens—but reveals little. The red and the blue markedly disguises economic debacles of capitalist governance within visibly politicized moral maps that supposedly reflect the “private” psychologies of citizens and their vulnerable families.

---

## Endnotes

- 1 WordIQ.com
- 2 “When blue states attack”, Ann Coulter, December 25, 2003.
- 3 These communities were observed on a road-trip through the farm country of central Illinois, on old Highway Route 66, during August 2004.
- 4 <http://www.electoral-vote.com/>
- 5 Recent Google searches (September 4, 6, 8, 10) for “red state, blue state” found over 1, 000 News references. A general search revealed over 5,000,000 Google hits, although there is no way to prove the number of specific political references among these.
- 6 Philip Klinkner. “Red and Blue Scare: The Continuing Diversity of the American Electoral Landscape.” *The Forum: Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics*.
- 7 A recent visit to a local bookstore provided validation for this claim. Dozens of polemical, political texts have been written the right and left. They argue for change, for pleasure in being right, to vindicate an old bureaucratic grievance, and to avenge election losses. Most rely on the notion that America is divided between to intractable camps of thinking, morality, and values.

- 8 The moral panic is quite familiar to twentieth or twenty-first century American politics. And the seeming resurgence of specific religious values, which infuse the panics with a certain religious rectitude, is not something new, but rather a change of political appeals:  
 “This resurgence reflects the end of the New Deal, conceived as a secular welfare state as well as a regression to religious rhetorics and values of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In secular terms, these rhetorics exhort patriotism and love of country, free enterprise, and free trade; they identify the public good with expansion of business and rely on the family as the moral foundation of society. In effect the secular themes can be seen as transvaluations of earlier Protestant conceptions of America as the redeemer nation whose righteousness was grounded in a morality of self-discipline, hard work, propriety, civic mindedness, asceticism, and the self-appointed mission to carry forth God’s work on this earth. Implicit in this coentwined claim to righteousness is included a calling to judge the conduct of others in terms of this moral structure. Those who fully measure up to the standard of Protestant morality can be admitted into America’s covenant with god. Those who do not measure up could not compete effectively in the open marketplace that classical liberalism enshrined with virtue; moreover they are excluded from the community of the elect and are unregenerate in the eyes of God and community. Under President Ronald Reagan these values now not only are linked to the sanctity of the traditional family, the deregulation of business and the dissolution of the ‘welfare state’, but also to military strength and preparedness, and are offered as the basic moral-political solution to problems in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Vidich 4).  
 The basic moral-political solution of a quasi-secularized Protestant right (not just linked under Reagan’s Republican administration) has formed new contours in the provocative maps that identify the red-right states and the blue-left states.
- 9 Ironically, ‘queer’ was born in the effort to resist the discursive assimilation of ‘gay and lesbian’, to demand tolerance, if not outright recognition: “Tolerance makes a wedge for some flexibility in symbolic order organized according to prescribed, allowed, and forbidden practices. Forbidden practices threaten to display arbitrariness of the social real. But tolerance smoothes over the irruption of the forbidden, incorporating it as the ‘allowable’ by way of minoritizing discourse. In this sense, tolerance is crisis management in action. Full democracy, of course, entails more than giving under-represented groups their civil rights. It also requires eliminating the inequities between the haves and the have-nots that make tolerance of ‘minorities’ necessary” (Hennessy 218).
- 10 “The radical has two ways of answering the question of why exploitation is wrong, neither of which seems all that appealing. You can go universal, and speak of what belongs to the dignity of humanity as a species; or you can go local, and see ideas of freedom and justice as springing from traditions which, despite being purely cultural and historical, nonetheless exert a compelling force over us. The problem with the first approach is that it seems to squeeze out history, whereas the problem with the second approach is that it seems to narrowly invest in it” (Eagleton 150).
- 11 So, although left-wing critic and disturbingly reactionary scholar David Horowitz warns of queer theory being a “secular idolatry identical to that of the Communist apocalypse” [!], a real materialist or Marxist project is *not* the actual new-left identity project, which has tread in entirely the opposite direction. The identity project has constructed the social, intellectual space to conceive difference, alienation, and exploitation in playfully flexible, but not effective political formations.
- 12 “A network of social relations that connect the secular and the Christian and that through the ‘the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism’ connect the secular market with Christianity and with ‘family values’. Thus, the right’s investment in sexist, racist, or antihomosexual discourse is precisely as a crucial site to construct a whole series of social relations that fundamentally revolve around the relationship between what we might call economic values and those cultural or moral values that in right discourse carry the name ‘family’. Specifically... ‘family values’ mediates between the economy and the ‘American’ nation under contemporary market conditions by offering a discourse that can mediate between exploitation and domination. In other words, ‘family’ (rather than the state) mediates between economy and nation, and ‘values’ mediates between exploitation and domination” (Jakobsen 50).
- 13 “Personal politics that displaces struggle from collective challenges to structural oppression and exploitation to the realm of intimacy” and especially when, as it seems, intimate encounters subsist as the decisive core of queer identities (*and* now straight, gay, lesbian, top-bottom, young-old, et. al.) (Cloud 74).

## References

Altman, Dennis. "Global Gaze/Global Gays". *Sexual Identities: Queer Politics*. Mark Blasius, ed. Princeton University Press: Princeton, Oxford, 2001.

Brown, Wendy. "Wounded Attachments: Late Modern Oppositional Political Formations". *The Identity In Question*. John Rajchman, ed. Routledge, NY, 1995.

Chauncey, George Jr. "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era." Ed. Elizabeth Reis. *American Sexual Histories*. Blackwell Publishers: MA, 2001.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity, and Difference." *Marxism Beyond Marxism*. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl, Eds. Routledge: NY, NY, 1996.

Cloud, Dana. "Queer Theory and 'Family Values': Capitalism's Utopias of Self-Invention". *Transformation, Marxist Boundary Work in Theory, Economics, Politics, and Culture (2): Marxism, Queer Theory, Gender*. The Red Factory: Syracuse, NY, 2002.

Crimp, Douglas. "Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality". *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, London, 2002.

Critcher, Chas. "Media, Government, and Moral Panic: the politics of paedophilia in Britain 2000-1". *Journalism Studies*, Volume 3, Number 4, p. 521-535, 2002.

D'Emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity". *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*. Roger N. Lancaster & Micaela di Leonardo, eds. Routledge: NY, NY, 1997.

Eagleton, Terry. "Morality". *After Theory*. Basic Books: Cambridge, MA., 2003.

Edwards, Tim. *Erotics and Politics of Culture*. Routledge, N.Y., NY, 1994.

Erjavec, Karmen. -SUMMER WAGE LETTERS\*\* Faculty (ask HR) (LM)request information re: staff/fac for summer wage letters.

Eldred, Maria. "Media Construction of Identity Through Moral Panics: Discourses of Immigration in Slovenia". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1:83-101, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*. Vintage Books: New York, N.Y, 1977.

Gagnon, John H. and Richard G. Parker. "Conceiving Sexuality". *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a Postmodern World*. Routledge: NY, 1995.

Greenberg, David F. "Transformation of Homosexuality-Based Classifications". *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*. Roger N. Lancaster & Micaela di Leonardo, eds. Routledge: NY, NY, 1997.

Hawdon, James E. "The Role of Presidential Rhetoric in the Creation of a Moral Panic: Reagan, Bush, and the War on Drugs". *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 22: 419-445, 2001.

Hennessy, Rosemary. "Queer Theory, Left Politics". *Marxism Beyond Marxism*. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl, Eds. Routledge: NY, NY, 1996.

Herdt, Gilbert. *Same Sex, Different Cultures: Gays and Lesbians Across Cultures*. Westview Press: Boulder, CO, 1997.

Hier, Sean P. "Risk and Panic in Late Modernity: Implications of the Converging Sites of Social Anxiety". *Journal of Sociology*. Volume 54, Number 1, p. 3-20, 2003.

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *One Nation, Two Cultures: A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution*. Alfred A. Knopf: NY, NY, 1999.

Horowitz, David. "The Queer Fellows". *American Spectator*. Vol. 26, Issue 1, p 42, 1993.

Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press: New York City, N.Y, 1996.

Jakobsen, Janet R. "Can Homosexuals End Western Civilization As We Know It? Family Values In A Global Economy". *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV (eds.). New York University Press: New York, 2002.

Joseph, Miranda. "Family Affairs: The Discourse of Global/Localization". *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV (eds.). New York University Press: New York, 2002.

Kulick, D. & Willson, M., eds. *Taboo: Sex, identity, and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Lancaster, Roger N. & Micaela di Leonardo, eds. *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*. Routledge: NY, NY, 1997.

Lehring, Gary. *Officially Gay*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2003.

Marx, Karl & Fredrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. 1932.

Medovoi, Leerom. "Globalization as Narrative and Its Three Critiques". *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 24: 63-75. Taylor and Francis, 2001.

Morton, Donald. "Pataphysics of the Closet: Queer Theory as the Art of Imaginary Solutions for Unimaginary Problems". *Transformation, Marxist Boundary Work in Theory, Economics, Politics, and Culture (2): Marxism, Queer Theory, Gender*. The Red Factory: Syracuse, NY, 2000.

"Global (Sexual) Politics, Class Struggle, and the Queer Left". *Post-Colonial Queer: Theoretical Intersections*. John C. Hawley (ed.). SUNY Press: Syracuse, 2001.

Ross, Ellen & Rayna Rapp. "Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology". *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*. Roger N. Lancaster & Micaela di Leonardo, eds. Routledge: NY, NY, 1997.

Rubin, Gayle S. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality". *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Carol S. Vance, ed. Routledge: NY, 1984.

Sears, Hal D. *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America*. The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977.

Stacey, Judith. "Virtual Social Science and the Politics of Family Values". *Critical Anthropology Now: Unexpected Contexts, Shifting Constituencies, Changing Agendas*. George E. Marcus, ed. School of American Research Press: Santa Fe, 1999.

Steinberg, Deborah Lynn and Debbie Epstein and Richard Johnson. *Border Patrols: Policing the Boundaries of Heterosexuality*. Cassel, UK, 1997.

Sullivan, Andrew. *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995.

Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York University Press, New York, 2003.

Terry, Jennifer. *American Obsession: Science, Medicine and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Weeks, Jeffrey. 'Sexual Values Revisited', in *New Sexual Agendas*, p 43-59. Ed. Lynne Segal. New York: NYU Press, 1997.

Vance, Carol S. "Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality". *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?* A. van Kooten Nierkirk and T. Van De Meer, eds. An Dekker: Amsterdam, 1989.